

# CONDOLENCES FOR CYNTHIA

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"I'M so blue, Cousin Kate, that I want to have my funeral celebrated to-day to cheer me up. You know if I were dead you would send gorgeous flowers, and you, too, Cousin Bob. Think of the wonderful wreath you sent Mr. Cowan just because he was in the bank with you, and only last week you called him an old skinflint. You didn't even like him, and you do like me. Why, if gardenias went to him, I feel sure lilies of the valley and orchids would come to me! And I'm starving for flowers *now*, to-day, this very minute—and I won't care for heaps and heaps when I'm dead. Let's compromise on half as many as you would send if I had met with a fatal accident and we'll call it perfectly square forever, and your liability will cease."

Cousin Bob chuckled good-humoredly and Cousin Kate was comfortably scandalized.

"My dear child, you sound horribly callous, joking about your own funeral and reminding Bob of what he said of Mr. Cowan before his—er—taking off. Certainly you may have all the flowers you wish, but this is a ghastly way to ask for them, Cynthia."

"It's the only way I could do it decently, Cousin Kate, don't you see?" the girl pleaded. "There is absolutely no reason for the family to send me flowers all at once unless I am dead or ill. And I want a lot of them; I want to feel drowned in color and intoxicated in perfume just as I feel in the garden at home. Oh, spring in a city—especially a hideous, strutting little city like this—is a travesty, a mockery!"

"It was singing in the choir at Mr. Cowan's funeral this morning which gave me the idea. Nobody liked him while he was alive, yet to-day there was 'a lavish wealth of floral offerings.' Maybe if he

had been given them when he was alive (perhaps not exactly the flowers, but the kind thought and the sympathy translated into some sort of tangible expression of interest) he wouldn't have been an old skinflint at all. Then I began to think of what lovely flowers each of you would send if I were dead, or even having an operation for appendicitis, until the tears trickled down my nose, and I made up my mind to come straight here and ask you to please not wait. You know you like to be ahead of time, Cousin Kate; it seems so competent. Don't think I'm crazy; I'm just homesick. Good-by."

Cynthia fled from the room, and Cousin Bob looked after her kindly.

"What a child she is! The tears were pretty close to the surface. I'm glad to humor her whim; should have sent her posies long ago if I had known she wanted them. With that bumptious independence of hers she has let us do hardly anything for her since she came here to live. What was it she said I should be sure to send?"

He picked up the desk-telephone, called up a florist, and ordered lilies of the valley and orchids to be sent to Miss Cynthia Rutledge with his card.

"Hold the line a moment. Shall I order yours, too, Kate?"

His sister nodded assent.

"Roses," she decided, "though it would serve the little goose right if I presented her with an anchor of camellias and tuberoses."

"Four dozen roses," he directed. "What's that, eh? Killarney? Very well, they will do. Same address, with Mrs. Richard Lawrence's card."

"Who is it?" asked Jane Lawrence softly, coming into the room at that moment with her brother Dick behind her.

"Cynthia," replied her mother absently.

"Oh, *no*!" cried the girl in a shocked

voice. "And she looked so well and pretty only last Sunday. Uncle Robert, please order something for me—snowdrops, if he has them, great quantities of them, with jonquils. I've heard her say how she loved spring flowers. Oh, *poor* little Cynthia! When did it hap—"

"For Heaven's sake, Jane, hush!" interrupted her mother sharply. "Cynthia isn't dead. It's just an idiotic game of hers."

Mrs. Lawrence explained it, and Dick heartily seconded the plan.

"I think it's a ripping idea. I'll order your collection, Jane, and something on my own account. Violets would be the correct thing. What a funny girl she is! I'm not very keen on relations, you know, but Cynthia is really a corker. It's plucky in her to earn her own living singing in choirs and giving music lessons, so that the money at home may go to the youngsters' education. I think she deserves a most diverting funeral."

By the time Cynthia had reached her boarding-place she was ashamed of the mood of unrest which had made her ask for sympathy and she called up Cousin Bob.

"I'm so sorry I whined. Please forget it and don't pay any attention to anything I said."

"Too late," he chuckled. "Our expressions of condolence are already wending their mournful way."

Cynthia had no lessons to give that afternoon and she was glad to stay indoors, as the day was dull and gray. She started guiltily when the florist's wagon stopped at the house and four large boxes were brought in. Then she forgot everything else in the sheer joy of opening the boxes and reveling in their fragrant contents.

She buried her nose intimately in the pink roses, she kissed the snowdrops and lilies-of-the-valley, because the walks at home were bordered with them; she put the orchids in her prettiest vase and apologized to the mauve aristocrats that it was not dainty enough; she arranged the jonquils in bowls, Japanese fashion, keeping every flower apart as if growing; and the great bunch of violets was pinned on her gray frock. She was "playing" with herself and having as happy a time as in her doll-house days.

After everything was arranged to her liking in the bit of a room which served

as her sitting-room, and she had gone out to throw away the litter of paper and boxes, the bell rang and the maid admitted a visitor for Miss Rutledge.

He was tall and lean, with the slight stoop of the scholar, and from behind his glasses friendly brown eyes looked out absently, but kindly, upon the world. They quickened now with an expression of amazement as he was ushered into Cynthia's room and saw it so brave with flowers. A queer sense of irritation sprang up from unsuspected depths of his being. Had they recognized her so quickly, then, in the city? Was that delicate, childish charm of hers a thing to be known by the many? It seemed to him a subtle gift which would be prized only by the few. This room might belong to the latest popular star. It was astonishing, it was even disconcerting.

He turned at an exclamation of pleasure as Cynthia came into the room.

"Why, Dr. Holbrook! What brings you to this place?"

"A forestry convention," he answered. She was struck by an odd, dubious note in his voice, as if he himself was not altogether sure.

"If I were a professor of forestry, I should never take this time of the year to talk about conservation in dirty, grimy cities. I should not be able to spare one moment from the woods themselves."

"Conventions are disappointing affairs," he admitted somewhat wearily. "The same group of us are here—the same academic group—while the farmers we wish to reach take no interest in it."

"They are too busy at home cutting down trees and clearing out timber," she said sympathetically.

"I wish they might hear you tell how you first learned the meaning of protection, when you saw the fire from the broom-straw gradually licking its way toward a young, long-leaf pine. It has been a vivid picture to me ever since—that thirteen-year-old girl fighting the fire all alone, beating it back with her coat, and finally saving her little tree."

"It sounds very pretty as you tell it," she laughed. "You've left out the two holes burned in the back of the coat I had to wear the rest of the winter, and the scoldings I deservedly had. Tell me what reports you've had of the barren areas that were being reforested with long-leaf pine."

"I won't. I'm going to have a vacation from trees this afternoon."

"Then you'll talk good roads," she returned with resignation. "If you aren't eloquently begging the woodman to spare that tree, you're hammering for good roads."

Her voice boomed in a clever mimicry of Holbrook's bass:

"The sand-clay road solves the problem for this section; it is equal to ordinary macadam, cheaper to construct, and cheaper to maintain—for a good road must be a good road three hundred and sixty-five days in the year!"

"You are as impertinent as ever." His relish in the fact was unmistakable. "But I'm going to talk about flowers this time. Is it a birthday?" He indicated the many vases.

Her dimple struggled with her decorum, and won. It may be said that Cynthia giggled daintily.

"It's—it's a funeral," she explained, and at the look of soberness which overspread Holbrook's face, she added hastily, "*mine*."

This did not simplify matters, so she went on in hurried elucidation.

"I was perfectly starved for flowers; I never knew before what it meant to go through spring without flowers and color and fragrance. I was ungrateful for the many kindnesses of my generous, warm-hearted cousins here, who are always giving me something I don't want. At Christmas Cousin Kate gave me the most imposing umbrella with an inlaid handle—"

"And you never use an umbrella at all. When it rains you put on a slicker and that piquant little cap," he interrupted.

She looked up in surprise that he should recall so trifling a detail about her inconspicuous self.

"Cousin Bob takes me to 'musical' comedies, falsely so called; and dear, sweet Jane gives me elaborate boudoir-caps when I'm out and giving a music lesson by half past eight every morning; and Dick, who is a trump, sends me shelves of best-sellers which gobble up time from the books I'm yearning to read. They're always wanting to do something for me, so I asked them to send my funeral flowers to-day that I might enjoy them myself. I was homesick for mother and the garden," she ended shamefacedly.

She thought Dr. Holbrook would be

laughing at her, but nothing seemed farther from his thoughts.

"I suppose each one sent what seemed to express you best," he speculated. "Jonquils—that's the joy in you, the irrepressible sauciness, the spring-time. And those pink roses are your girlhood, dewy and rosy and unfolding, and the snowdrops explain you in their name. Why orchids?" he questioned, frowning. "I don't find you in any flower that is not fragrant. Is it Joubert who believes 'the odors of flowers are their souls'? But I should not have chosen any of these."

He was regarding her abstractedly, as if thinking aloud.

"Where is the telephone?"

"In the back hall," she replied. She thought he was sending a message to the convention hall, and when he reentered the room she said, "I told you that you couldn't keep out of the tree-tops for long."

"You were mistaken for once. I was telephoning to the nearest florist, and I quite alarmed him by my demands for urgency. It happened that I miss the flower which I instantly connected with you. Perhaps it is because it is finely durable, it is conqueringly hardy, and yet it is pure and sweet and delicately lovely. Which of these is your own favorite?"

"None," she confessed, "though it sounds ungracious and though I care for them all. When grandmother married in 1861 there was just an hour before her soldier-lover had to march away. As they walked across the churchyard together he broke off an armful of white lilacs for her and she held them while the minister read the service. When mother was married she carried white lilacs, too, and so they are associated in my mind with those I love most dearly." She broke off suddenly. "I'm talking a lot about myself. Tell me of everything that's happening at the university. I had such a good time there last summer. I do hope I can go back to the summer-school this year."

"You nearly worked yourself to death, taking all those lectures on harmony and expression and my prosy forestry talks on the side. It has ruined my teaching," he went on gruffly. "If you can imagine what it means to look at a row of listless faces or respectful student faces, and then to have your eyes fall on one avid little face like yours—listening with all your heart as well as your mind, and from sheer love of

it! Not because you've a living to make out of it or a certain course of study that requires it, but as you explained that first day, 'I love trees so much that I can't tell whether I care most for them in their strong, bare bones or with their graceful green frocks on. But I have only a climber's acquaintance; I want to be introduced to them in formal terms.'

Again the girl's gray eyes widened in surprise. It was inexplicable that this dignified, imperturbable professor, absorbed in his profession of forestry and his hobby of good roads, could quote a trivial speech of hers after all these months. She beat back a foolish, glad thought which winged its way to her brain, as she had stifled many thoughts of Holbrook through the lonely winter.

A double ring at the door attracted his attention.

"It must be the flowers. May I see?"

Cynthia heard the messenger's emphatic thanks and surmised a lavish tip for his promptness.

"You look solemn, Herr Professor," she laughed, as he came in with a huge box.

His eyes were serious and his voice earnest as he replied:

"It is the gravest moment of my life, Cynthia."

With hands that trembled in spite of herself she opened the box. She gave a quick, involuntary breath as a familiar perfume was wafted about them like a blessing, and she saw the billowy masses of white lilacs.

"You see, I had ordered them *before* I dreamed that they would be—your bridal flowers."

He caught her hand in both his own and held it closely.

"Do you think me just a fossil of a forester, Cynthia? Is there any hope that

some day you will carry *my* lilacs through the churchyard?"

"But—but—" she stammered. "I didn't know that you cared anything on earth about me."

"Neither did I," he echoed happily, still incredulous of the wonderful thing which had overtaken him. "I thought when I missed you every day in the classes it was because I missed your enthusiasm. I—why, I even spoke to young Davison about it, and I recall that he—er—*grinned*. You see, he recognized it, but I am so much older I did not understand myself. Why, Cynthia, I honestly believed I was coming up here to the forestry convention, though every bit of the way I was thinking that I had your address and that I should see you soon." His voice was growing in confidence, in masterfulness.

"It was seeing all the flowers and the sudden savage fear that somebody else had won my girl which made me understand like a flash of light that you were the dearest thing in life to me. Oh, Cynthia, little, dear Cynthia, will you go with me all the way?"

"On good roads or bad," she whispered. Her voice was audacious, but there was a mist before her eyes.

"If I had realized that I was going to propose to you this afternoon I should have come in fear and trembling, convinced beforehand that I should make a miserable, awkward failure of it. But it's the simplest thing in the world and incredibly delightful."

With an utter disregard of her violets, he had taken the slim figure in his arms. Held a prisoner there, Cynthia asked in her most deferential class-room manner:

"Is it really true about the petrified forest? I no longer believe in a petrified forester."